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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 001487

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/ARP:AMACDONALD AND H/EX AMACDERMOTT

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TAGS: PGOV PREL OVIP YM

SUBJECT: EMBASSY SANA'A WELCOMES CODEL MCCAIN AUGUST 16-17

REF: STATE 77170

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Embassy Sana'a warmly welcomes CODEL McCain to Yemen.

The poorest country in the Arab world, Yemen and its government continue to face multiple, serious challenges. We have seen little if any improvement in the political, security, and economic situations facing the country in recent years. Parliamentary elections scheduled for April were delayed by two years, exacerbating existing unrest in the South to the point that there are now regular and continuing public demonstrations. Violence has ramped up in the northern governorate of Sa'ada, making the onset of the sixth round of that continuing conflict a real possibility. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has continued with its operational planning, and appears to be responsible for the recent kidnapping of nine foreign aid workers (and the murder of three) in Sa'ada. The whereabouts and well-being of the remaining six hostages is still unclear. Falling oil prices have forced the ROYG to recalculate its budget to account for drastically reduced revenues, and the Yemeni rial, after being stable for a long period, has begun to waiver.

BILATERAL RELATIONS

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¶2. (S) On the positive side, the election of President Obama and his speech in Cairo were both well-received by the ROYG and Yemenis in general, creating a modest but noticeable increase in confidence in U.S. policy in the region. President Saleh himself has not been immune to this trend, and has made it known that he is eager to develop a strong, personal relationship with President Obama along the lines of that which he enjoyed with President Bush. He may well use the occasion of your visit to raise his interest in visiting Washington once again. If he does, I suggest you reply that you understand that the White House is looking into the timing of the visit in order to schedule it in such a way as to maximize its success and highlight our close and productive bilateral relationship.

GUANTANAMO

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¶3. (S) The return of convicted terrorist financier Sheikh Mohamed Moayed on August 11 has generated a positive response among the Yemeni population. At the same time, his release has put new attention on the return of Yemeni detainees currently held at GTMO. As of this writing, the Obama Administration still has no concrete plan for the disposition

of the Yemeni detainees in GTMO, who constitute nearly 40 percent of the population there. The Saleh's regime's failure to secure their repatriation continues to be used by the President's critics against him. Earlier this year, President Saleh - in an unexpected about-face - agreed to allow Yemeni nationals to be turned over to the Saudi rehabilitation program until a facility to house and rehabilitate them in Yemen can be prepared. The ROYG has designated a site for the rehabilitation center near Aden and is waiting for financial assistance to prepare it. (Note: Saleh continues to ask for this assistance, which is being discussed in Washington. The Saudis have offered to fund this facility, which will provide Saleh with important cover against his domestic critics, and enable Yemen to securely house and provide job training and religious re-orientation for not just GTMO returnees, but also for the large, radicalized population already present in Yemen. End Note.)

SOCOTRA

¶4. (U) Socotra, a small archipelago of four islands in the Indian Ocean, is so isolated that a third of its 800 species of plants are found nowhere else on the planet. The main island has three geographical terrains: the narrow coastal plains, a limestone plateau permeated with karstic caves, and the Hagher Mountains. Botanists rank the flora of Socotra among the ten most endangered island flora in the world. The archipelago is a site of global importance for biodiversity conservation and a possible center for ecotourism. The island was recognized by the United Nations Educational,

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Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a world natural heritage site in July 2008. Almost all inhabitants of Socotra's 50,000 inhabitants live on the main island. The Yemeni government, and in particular the Ministry of Water and the Environment, have made great efforts recently to preserve Socotra's ecological and cultural heritage and promote eco-tourism on the island. The use of qat, the narcotic leaf chewed daily by most Yemenis, was banned on the island in 2009.

SECHE